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MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

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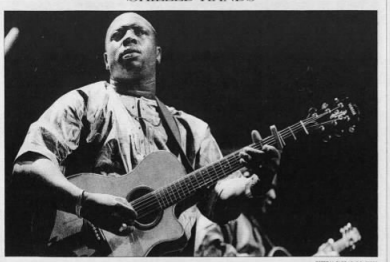

PETER MACCABE / THE GAZETTE

MALIAN GUITARIST VIEUX FARKA TOURÉ performs at Club Soda as part of the Montreal International Jazz Festival Wednesday night.

Iyer is a writer and musician

His liner-notes act as counter-point to his songs

JOHN KATZ

"I got to play with a lot of elder musicians and learned from their perspective what the music was about and what it was for," Vijay Iyer says.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

Vijay Iyer speaks in calm, professorial cadence, with noticeable moments of silence between sentences. Largely self-taught on the piano (after formal violin lessons), he was taking a PhD in physics at University of California at Berkeley when, in the early 1990s, he became house pianist for a little North Oakland club called the Bird Kage. The experience set him on his way to becoming one of the most heralded young pianists in jazz today, befitting his invitation series starting at the Gesù on Thursday.

"I got to play with a lot of elder musicians," he said last week, "and learned from their perspective what the music was about and what it was for, and also from the community that came out to that little hole in the wall. It was a big deal for them: the music was a part of their lives, and so it was about storytelling, and they had this real communicative power. I learned how to listen to fellow musicians and to the audience.

"It taught me about patience and variety — how to keep the music alive. If you're coming on, say, Invitation and there are eight saxophonists standing in line to take a solo, how do you do more than just supply the chords? How do you actually make music out of that situation? The stamina to keep listening also meant keeping things alive rhythmically.

"... I remember the biggest compliment I've ever received was from the trumpet player (Robert Porter) running the session. We were playing a ballad, Skylark, and I took a solo and he leaned over and said: 'Hey man, you play like old people!' " He laughs. "That was great."

His trio outing Historicity was nominated for a 2010 Grammy and was named top album of the year by Downbeat, the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune and the Village Voice, among others. His latest album Accelerando has received similar accolades.

Iyer emerged during the beginnings of the World Wide Web. I asked him how the Internet has changed everything — the way we behave, react, create — as related to the possibilities of music and arts in general.

"It's easy to say that it enables us to hear more, but it also enables us to forget more quickly without ever feeling the need to make sense of an experience — there's always something else to consume. I think it's become this systematized way of constantly forgetting, because all the memory is externalized. For me it's kind of terrifying, not because I'm overly attached to my memories, but because without memories who are you? That's the real question, which I don't think anyone knows how to answer. You can't drag your future along with you.

"It's one thing to live in the present, with an awareness of where you've come from, how you got to where you are, as a person and also as one speckle in the stream of history. So (surfing the Internet) becomes part of this daily ritual of forgetting. I find that people don't even remember what happened yesterday. To me, what I am is the sum of my experiences. In addition, I try to cultivate a critical understanding of those experiences. If our experience is one of simply surfing experience, the basic question of 'Who are you?' becomes very difficult to answer. I think it means that maybe we're in some sort of transitional space culturally.

"There's a kind of re-grounding that occurs in the quest of performance. There's a new-found awareness of our humanity. It's not like something on a screen, or listening to the traces of somebody's actions as contained in some device that's in your pocket. Then you're not really accountable to your own relationship to that person. I guess what I'm interested in is empathy."

Iyer is also well-known for his writings, in CD liner notes and more substantial papers geared toward music cognition. A 1998 dissertation, composed after he left the physics department and started an interdisciplinary PhD program in Technology and the Arts, was titled Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics.

He says that most people download files and "don't attach it to an object, let alone one that has some printed words. As a result, most people don't even read my liner notes. Then again I've put a lot of time and thought into that process of creating some sort of counterpoint to the music, or parallel experience, that might have a poetic dimension to it, an almost rational dimension. It's writerly. I'm not writing a scientific article, but I am trying to express something that might actually be un-expressible, something that people who revisit the CD will revisit for years to come.

"I personally cherish every bit of writing by musicians that I can find, in whatever format, to get a glimpse of what that person was thinking about at that moment. Even if the music exceeds that — and you hope that it does — I'm not trying to explain the music. I'm barely even describing it. I'm just throwing out a statement for those who care to read about whatever process I was going through when we made the album."

The heart and soul of jazz is improvisation. It's what attracts ardent listeners and, alas, intimidates neophytes to the music.

"The fact is that we all improvise. You can follow rules and improvise, too. A good example is when we play a sport, like basketball. It's highly regulated, where you can step and where you can't step, how many steps you can take at a given moment, how long you can hold the ball — and in the face of all that, improvisation is not only possible, it's necessary to do anything meaningful.

"Improvisation is such an integral part of who we are. Music that features improvisation simply magnifies and accentuates that basic fact about our lives, reaching people in that way."

There's a political side to Iyer, as well. In 2003, he premiered In What Language?, his first collaboration with poet-producer-performer Mike Ladd, a song cycle about airports, fear and surveillance before and after 9/11. Then came Still Life with Commentator, a satire about 24-hour news culture during wartime.

"It's about life in a paranoid and hyper-surveillance culture during wartime as viewed through the lens of black and brown subjectivity. Basically what we had been keeping our distance from was the lived experience of war itself. So our next project (Holding It Down) would be exactly about that, and that we were all somehow implicated in that. We collaborated with veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly American ex-soldiers of colour, where they talked about their dreams, and made musical poetic statements out of those dream narratives. (The album will be released in a couple of months.) Some are more surreal, wistful, or fantasy-type dreams of, say, meeting Tupac. Some are unresolved dreams related to combat and post traumatic stress disorder. Because it's unprocessed it become a harrowing experience. Some people are able to heal from their experience and have dreams of normalcy. Others are taking medication so that they don't dream."

Meanwhile, playing solo, he says, is "process-driven music so even when I'm playing a composition of mine, that is meant to be reinvented in the moment, and I hope a lot of different things happen to that specific roomful of people, not for anything else. Again it's about establishing a connection."

Finally, I get up the nerve to ask him to explain to the lay reader what's behind the terms "embodied cognition" and "situated cognition."

He laughs heartily: "It's really that the mind is in the body and the body is in the world."

Vijay Iyer performs Thursday at 6 p.m. (in a trio with Stephan Crump and Justin Brown) Friday at 6 p.m. (in a duo with Craig Taborn) and solo on Saturday at 6 p.m. at the Gesù — Centre de créativité. Tickets are $42.45 and are available at montrealjazzfest.com.

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Pieranunzi plays a blend of jazz and classical

Pianist's style natural, smooth

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Enrico Pieranunzi, the top jazz pianist from Italy (and perhaps all of Europe), started out playing both classical music and jazz as a child. He eventually played on Ennio Morricone's soundtracks, propped up Chet Baker and, well into his career, wrote a book about Bill Evans. That should give you a preliminary idea of the elements in his style: structure, lush colour, judicious choice of notes, and swinging melodic lyricism, respectively.

"The feeling when I approach the piano," Pieranunzi said Wednesday, "it's as if I realize for a few seconds that I've never played it in my life. It's strange. What should I do with this thing? It's really beginning from tabula rasa, somehow. You are totally vulnerable, like a baby, and very insecure even though you pretend to be secure. Every time is a new experience."

There is a sense of occasion whenever Pieranunzi, 64, plays. When he celebrated the 200th anniversary of the piano, he played five different models on the 2006 solo album Canto Nascosto (meaning "hidden song").

"I played classical during the day and jazz with my father at night."
ENRICO PIERANUNZI

Indeed, the piano is like a cathedral of sound for him, and every occasion offers a chance to pay homage by being at your best.

Pieranunzi has a very distinctive approach, stemming from his classical and jazz background. Even his improvisations have a sense of structure that keeps them from being flimsy.

When many musicians try to blend jazz and classical music, the results often sound pretentious or, worse, sterile. With Pieranunzi, the process is natural.

"Previously I wasn't really aware of that. Now I understand this might be considered a trademark. I'm also very aware of the risks of mixing them. Yet, when I started playing piano at age 5, I played classical during the day and jazz with my father (a guitarist) at night. So it was a process of osmosis, one music feeling the other.

"The emotions I had from jazz were the same as I had for classical music. Different but very strong, and they merged when I started composing, even though initially I was unaware of it. These two forms of music were very important life experiences for me, and I never considered them conflicted. They are in my music naturally — without generating monsters. At least, that's the rational aspect. But when I'm playing it's more difficult to describe. It's probably easier for the listener to explain.

"I was very aware of the risks (of overtly mixing classical and jazz) when I recorded the Scarlatti sonatas and then improvised on them. As a listener in the past, I had always been very suspicious of these kinds of operations, in terms of taste and communication. When you play Bach or Scarlatti, you can hear in just a few notes that there's a depth and very wide soul. This is what captures me."

At his solo concert Thursday night he will probably play a couple of classical pieces, in addition to his experiences with Morricone and Fellini (La Strada), while accenting his own compositions.

While he is not as well-known in America as, say, Keith Jarrett or Brad Mehldau, three weeklong gigs since 2010 at New York's old temple of clubland, the Village Vanguard, have helped put him on the map. "For a European to play there, I sometimes use the comparison with soccer; like playing in the final of the world championship in Brazil." His debut was recorded for posterity by Pieranunzi's label, CamJazz.

Although he is featured on over 60 albums, and has composed some 150 tunes, he was surprised a few years ago when he topped a DownBeat poll of New Talent Deserving Wider Recognition. "I had to laugh. I've actually been 'discovered' recently in America, despite playing (professionally) for 45 years."

Pieranunzi is also a supreme melodist: "A melody has powerful narrative potential. One of the great mysteries of music is the possibility of breathing life into a story without needing to use words. It's as if the melody had its own silent words that turn it into a song. But in order to get there, you have to completely abandon yourself to it, and, in this, Bill Evans was clearly a master. It is no easy thing to make the piano sing the way he was able to.

"As we improvise, we never know what we will find during a concert. What you are looking for and what music can give you is surprise. At that moment it's no longer a question of control, but exactly the opposite, pure abandon. You can't control this wave of emotion, you have to set it free. People in the audience can really feel it when you open your soul in those moments. At that point the relationship with the audience becomes really magical."

Enrico Pieranunzi performs Thursday, July 4, at 7 p.m. at Cinquième Salle of Place des Arts as part of the Montreal International Jazz Festival. Tickets are $42 and are available at montrealjazzfest.com

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"The emotions I had from jazz were the same as I had for classical music. Different but very strong, and they merged when I started composing," says Enrico Pieranunzi.

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